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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, NOVEMBER 23-30, 2007

11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania. These updates will supplement post's DAR reports and reporting cables.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

12. (U) Week in Review: November 25-December 10 marked the fifth annual national campaign for Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. In partnership with a range of civil society groups, the Albanian government took this opportunity to raise awareness of occurrences of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, trafficking in persons and child neglect. Government officials from various ministries spoke out to highlight the issue and the social services and legal recourses available to victims.

13. (U) Domestic violence remains a problem in Albania's traditional family life. While significant progress has been made on the issue in recent years, Albania's traditional family structure often shelters abuse, a situation of particular concern in remote rural areas. The GOA has implemented a greatly improved legal framework to address domestic violence, with tougher punishment for offenders. The influential Speaker of Parliament, Jozefina Topalli, has taken an active role in promoting women's rights and increasing mobilization of women's groups. There is hope that the appointment of Ina Rama as the first female Prosecutor General will further break down existing stereotypes of Albanian women.

14. (U) 95 Years Strong: Albanians accross the region celebrated 95 years of independence on November 28. Addressing a crowd of thousands at the site of the first declaration, the southern seaside town of Vlore, President Topi said: "The independence of Albania was neither a gift of the Great Powers to a country that did not expect it, nor an international creation of these Powers. Independence was the work of all the Albanian people."

15. (U) When Did the Last German Leave? While Albanians agree that Independence Day is November 28, Liberation Day, traditionally marked on November 29 as the day Albania was liberated from the Nazi regime, has yet to find national consensus. First celebrated by the communist dictatorship in 1945, the festivities often outshined Independence Day, serving as an annual reinforcement of the legitimacy of the dictatorship. With the fall of communism, then-President Berisha joined the two dates into one, but the decision was later reversed by the next (Socialist Party) government, which enshrined November 29 in the constitution. The two major political parties still celebrate Liberation separately. While the issue has become less political over time, everyone votes for two days off work rather than one.

16. (U) A Medical 'First': Doctors at a private medical clinic carried out last week the first kidney transplant in Albania. A joint American-Turkish-Albanian medical team carried out transplants on two individuals, using organs provided by family members. While

thousands of Albanians still seek specialized medical attention abroad in Western Europe and Turkey, plans have been laid for three new private hospitals that will provide services currently unavailable in the country.

¶17. (U) Budget Gets the Stamp of Approval: Parliament approved the national budget this week with a traditional party-line vote. A pre-election year, 2008's budget reflects last-ditch efforts to fulfill the government's previous campaign promises, including lower taxes and increased pensions. The implementation of a flat tax and 50% drop in corporate taxes should bring the budget to a peak of US \$4.1 billion, with 4% of GDP spent on education, 2.9% for health care, and just over 2% to meet NATO's required defense spending. Funds have also been set aside for large-scale infrastructure projects such as electricity upgrades and new roads. (Septel to follow.)

¶18. (U) Competition Authority Fines Mobile Companies: Following an investigation of the Albanian mobile market for 2004-2005, the Competition Authority imposed a fine of 3.76 million euros (USD 5.52 million) on the country's two operators, AMC and Vodafone. The companies disregarded existing regulations and abused their dominant position in the market, resulting in prices significantly higher than the rest of the region.

¶19. (U) The Albanian Competition Authority, operational since 2004, has begun to take an assertive stand in the market. In March, it fined eight insurance companies for anti-competitive practices and it has announced an investigation into the energy market for suspected price fixing. The authority's interventions are welcome news to the average Albanian consumer.

¶10. (U) Quote of the Week: Javier Solana, EU Foreign Policy Chief, referring to the need for political progress on judicial and

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electoral reforms, following his meeting with President Topi:

"As the President [Topi] emphasized and I quote him here, 'words are very important, statements are very important but actions are even more important.'"

¶11. (U) The Week Ahead: Albanian Armed forces will celebrate their 95th anniversary with a parade of 2,000 troops down Tirana's main thoroughfare. Preparations have been underway for weeks to showcase the considerable progress made by the armed forces, with added significance as Albania works toward a NATO invitation in the 2008 Bucharest summit. (The MOD noted to our Defense Attache that the troops have been trained in a new marching technique, which breaks from the "communist era goosestep.") Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi will visit Tirana next week, December 3.

¶12. (U) Person of the Week: Ismail Bej Qemal Vlora (1844-1919) was born in Vlore, Albania. He was the principal figure in the declaration of Albania's independence and the formation of the first independent government on November 28, 1912. A member of the Ottoman administration, Qemal arrived at the helm of the independence movement and drove the efforts to gain Great Power support for the move. Forseeing the disintegration of the Ottomans, he urged independence and raised the Albanian flag as a rallying cry for nationalists. While the government he formed did not last, Albania remained independent thereafter.

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